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THE
CAMBRO-BRITON.

OCTOBER, 1819.

NULLI QUIDEM MIHI SATIS ERUDITI VIDENTUR, QUIBUS
NOSTRA IGNOTA SUNT. *Cicero de Legibus.*

WELSH LANGUAGE.



PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS.

THE Origin of Language is a subject naturally of so much obscurity, that no rational hope can be indulged of arriving at any certain conclusion respecting it. Nor, has the variety of learning, so ostentatiously lavished upon this question, served to supply, in any satisfactory manner, the unavoidable deficiency of historical evidence. On the contrary, the multitude of bold conjectures and fanciful hypotheses, in which the subject has been involved, have served rather to encumber it with new doubt than to remove that, which originally belonged to it. So, it must still be considered, as it will necessarily ever remain, one of the most abstruse of human enquiries.

Of one thing, however, we can not reasonably entertain any doubt, and that is the existence of one language only among the first inhabitants of the earth. And, that this language was not of divine origin,—as has been often asserted, more, it may be presumed, from a pardonable excess of pious zeal than from any philosophical deductions,—we may safely set down also as an inference not to be overthrown*. Nor is it one at variance with the authority of Scripture, the voice of reason, or the testimony of experience. So far from it, that the sacred volume preserves an entire silence on the point, reason suggests no argument in favour of such divine inspiration, and our experience of the rudest stages of savage society is in direct opposition to the

* This expression has reference only to the instantaneous acquisition of a perfect language, and, by no means, to that capacity for forming one, as occasions might gradually demand, with which it is but reasonable to suppose the first family to have been supernaturally endowed.

theory when taken in a more general view. But if, for the sake of the argument, it were even to be conceded, that language was, at first, the gift of Heaven, it would add still greater weight to the position, above advanced, that "the whole earth *was*" originally "of one language and of one speech *."

Whether this primitive tongue was the Hebrew or not has also been a subject of learned and zealous controversy: and, although it is not absolutely necessary to pronounce any opinion here upon that part of the question, it may cursorily be observed, that the current of reasoning and evidence in this contest appears to be strongly against those, who advocate the claim of the Hebrew to this honour. A language of a still more simple, more determinate, in a word, of a more primitive character, even than that antient and pure tongue, was, in all probability, the first channel of oral intercourse amongst men †. Yet, if the palm of precedency in this respect must be denied to the Hebrew, we are justified by the simplicity of its construction, by its high antiquity, and by the sacredness of the purpose, to which it has been appropriated, in regarding it as one of the immediate dialects of the primeval language. If not then itself the first, it can scarcely be doubted, that it retains the elements of the very first speech of mankind, and may therefore be considered as an original tongue with reference to all others, that have descended to our times ‡.

* Genesis, ch. xi. v. 1 and 6.

† Dr. Priestly, in his "Lectures on the Theory of Language," has on this subject the following observation:—"The primitive language, or that which was spoken by the first family of the human race, must have been very scanty, and insufficient for the purposes of their descendants, in their growing acquaintance with the world." This remark cannot apply to the Hebrew.

‡ Grotius is one of those, who are of opinion, that the first language was entirely lost in the confusion of Babel. It is more probable, however, that it was partially preserved in all the new dialects, and, amongst these, most perfectly in the Hebrew. Yet it should not be disguised, that this distinction has been claimed for the Syriac, the Arabic, the Cophthic, the Æthiopic, the Armenian, and others, by their respective champions. And even the Dutch (*risum teneatis*?) has found a defender of its title to this high honour in that most illustrious oracle, Goropius Becanus. Dr. Priestly, in the Treatise already quoted, observes, that the Hebrew is "probably" (he might have said *certainly*,) "one of the most antient languages in the world; for we can discover no trace of its derivation from any other whatever." But which of all the languages of the East was the mother-tongue he thinks it "impossible, for want of sufficient historical data, to determine." Other writers, however, seem to have set this question at rest.

The Hebrew must then be taken as a criterion of the essential principles of a language—simplicity, uniformity, and expressiveness. And, in proportion as other tongues approach this venerable standard, must we judge also of the antiquity of their descent. There is no other rule, by which this claim can be decided; and it is, consequently, one, which the most eminent writers on the subject have concurred in adopting.

Now, if, with reference to what has been here premised, it can be shewn, that the language, at this day spoken in Wales, possesses many features likewise characteristic of the Hebrew; that it has an analogy in its radical words, in the formation of its verbs, and even in its idiom—and all this without a rival among the other European tongues—it will necessarily follow, that a pre-eminence over these must be granted to the Welsh, at least on the score of antiquity. And, accordingly, although it may not be possible to confirm the hypothesis of those who trace its origin at once to Babel, we may, without hazard, espouse the opinion of the celebrated Dr. Davies, who regards it as one of the maternal languages of Europe, derived immediately from the East*.

But the antiquity of the Welsh language is not the only point, for which it is meant to contend. It will likewise be the aim of this Dissertation, of which these cursory remarks are merely to be considered as introductory, to establish its superior claim to copiousness, expressiveness, and poetical flexibility. In these three qualities the language of the antient Cymry has been proved by its admirers to shine proudly conspicuous, as also in the perfection of its grammatical rules. A few writers, foreign as well as native, have done justice to its enviable distinction in these respects. And it can only have been owing to the unaccountable neglect, which the Welsh tongue has experienced at home, and to the contempt to which it has accordingly been consigned abroad, that this truth has not been universally acknowledged.

It may appear extraordinary, if not incredible, to those, who have not made this subject their study, that in a remote corner of an insulated country should be found a language so highly distinguished†. But, however limited its present dominion, it was,

* See the Preface to his Latin-Welsh Dictionary, and also that to his Grammar.

† The Welsh is here regarded, and it is presumed with justice, as the head of that family, of which the Armoric, Cornish, and Gaelic are also members.

at one time, the common dialect, not merely of this island, but of the greatest portion of Europe. It was the language of its first settlers,—of the Cimbri or Cimmerici of antient times, as it is that of their descendants in these days. For that the Cymry and the Cimbri were originally the same people would be evident from the complete identity of the name*, even if there were no historical testimony in support of the fact. But this testimony is not wanting; and, among the rest, the antient Triads, translated in this and the former number of the CAMBRO-BRITON, recognise the Cymry as the aboriginal inhabitants of this island. The modern Welsh are their lineal progeny, and have been, for centuries, the faithful depositories of a language, remarkable for many reasons, but for none more than for having survived, by its own native energy, the convulsive revolutions of time, scarcely at all impaired by an ordeal so full of peril.

The examination of this subject, it is therefore hoped, will not prove wholly uninteresting; and, as it is one of the leading objects of this work, a due regard to method will be observed in the Disquisition, of which this constitutes the preliminary essay. With this view, an attempt will be made to establish the propositions already advanced with respect to the general characteristics of the Welsh tongue, by a discussion of its subordinate peculiarities, by an investigation of its more minute excellencies, and by a comparison of all these with the analagous or correspondent features of other languages, antient and modern.

* * *

THE TRIADS.—No. II.

THE following “Triads of the Isle of Britain” are selected as containing all the notices in those antient documents respecting the COLONIZATION of this ISLAND. In some instances they will be found to ascend beyond the date of other written records; while, in many, they are confirmed by the concurrent testimony

* Cymry is derived from two words, Cyn and Bro, which signify, in Welsh, a first or aboriginal people. These component parts, by a combination natural to the language, form the word Cynmro, or Cymro, in its plural Cymry, of which the Greeks have made their *Κυμρίων* (an appellation as old as the time of Homer), and the Romans, with more accuracy, their Cimbri. The name of Cambria is comparatively a modern corruption, founded in the fables of Geoffrey of Monmouth.